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SUBJECT: NW RUSSIA REACTIONS TO PRESIDENT OBAMA'S VISIT

¶1. (SBU) Summary. Reaction to President Obama's recent Moscow visit generally has been positive in Northwest Russia, despite some lingering apprehensions about the future course of U.S.-Russian relations. Local polls show the general attitude towards the United States in St. Petersburg following the visit improved slightly, although that improvement varied depending on the demographic category. Most Russians we talked to here after the visit viewed it positively as an important bridge-building step. Some local contacts, however, expressed doubts about whether the visit would produce any substantive, positive changes in U.S.-Russia relations. End Summary.

¶2. (SBU) We recently discussed President Obama's July visit to Moscow with a well-respected political science professor from a university in the Arkhangelsk region. The professor said Russians thought President Obama's visit had provided a useful foundation for improved bilateral relations. It was evident that President Obama had forged a closer relationship with Russian President Medvedev than he had with Prime Minister Putin, he added, although some Russians thought that President Obama did so in order to drive a wedge between the "power tandem" of President Medvedev and PM Putin. Nevertheless, the President's visit also firmly demonstrated that the United States wanted a strong ally to work with on an array of issues.

¶3. (SBU) In our post-visit discussion with a group of local academics, some analysts stressed that while it appeared a positive relationship had developed between President Obama and Medvedev, PM Putin still held the key levers of power when it came to substantially reshaping foreign policy. This was problematic, they said, since Putin had used the United States to his advantage in the past as a foil in order to justify his tightened grip on domestic policy and developments. As a result, regardless of any genuine desire on either side to improve cooperation, Putin would not likely support significantly improved bilateral relations unless they would provide substantial benefit to Russia, while allowing his government's current internal policies and grip on the "vertical of power" to remain intact.

¶4. (SBU) Most of the Consul General's contacts, including prominent cultural figures, academics, and other members of the local intelligentsia, were positive about the visit. The majority, including some supporters of PM Putin, expressed the hope that it would lead to a more productive, balanced relationship. Business leaders said they were hopeful a more balanced relationship would also lead to improved trade and investment ties between the two countries.

¶5. (SBU) A prominent opposition political leader in St. Petersburg said he believed President Obama was a leader with strong and sincere beliefs regarding the positive role democracy could play in Russia. He also viewed the Obama administration's "reset" as a refreshing departure from past USG approaches to Russia. That said, he expressed disappointment with the President's remarks on civil society, asserting that they appeared to fall short in comparison to his remarks on other topics. In addition, the President had not, in his view, emphasized strongly enough the need for greater Russian adherence to international human rights norms. Although he believed the "reset" between the United States and Russia was an important step forward, he also said much work remained to be

done to reform Russian internal policies - which he hoped the United States would actively support.

¶ 16. (SBU) Media coverage specific to President Obama's visit was generally limited in St. Petersburg, although it did provide interesting insights into Russian perceptions of the visit. One prominent analyst noted with approval that it was apparent President Obama purposefully had refrained from making his relationship with the Russian leadership personal, and had instead stuck to a clear focus on accomplishing concrete goals at the summit. The analyst further asserted that it appeared President Obama genuinely wanted to improve the tone of U.S./Russia relations, and that his actions would in time positively alter the Russian public's perception of America.

¶ 17. (SBU) Several discussions we had with typical St. Petersburg citizens, as well as a poll performed by the regional polling company ASI, suggested the visit only marginally affected the average Russian's opinion with respect to the United States. The positive impact of the visit was much more notable among younger demographic groups, with an increase of 20-30 percent expressing a favorable view of the U.S., according to the poll. These results were mirrored in our discussions with local citizens. One journalism professor at a local university told us that the visit had been positively received by the majority of his students. Older members of local families we talked to, however, were much more restrained in expressing positive feelings about America in general. While most interlocutors noted a positive difference in the tone of US foreign policy under the new administration, most were personally ambivalent about Russia's relations with the US, and believed that political developments in Russia were best left to the politicians and intellectuals to guide and shape.

¶ 18. (SBU) Comment. The general feeling towards the United States among contacts in our district, and especially among younger Russians, seems to have improved following President Obama's visit. Though this is a move in the right direction, some Russians in our district continue to view the U.S. either with ambivalence or negatively, in large part due to the deep seated and long-standing cynicism regarding what America's real intentions are towards Russia - a cynicism aided and abetted by anti-American content in some local and regional press.

GWALTNEY